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Gaita of Almer in trance, wearing cowrie jacket

Priest of Pendrawandin at the Kondagaon Marhai

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and in front of the shrine a pile of old clay elephants, bulls and horses. And indeed I was told that the Anga used to live up on the hillside but was offended by the rough Muria habits and moved down to the plain where he

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FIG. 26. A typical carved wooden pigeon often found in Muria shrines
Length 9½"

would not be offended by the sight of his worshippers eating beef. Here, in vivid symbol, was the god leading the hillmen down into the plains, from the open free hut to the enclosed house, to a reform of diet and a change of religious custom and the use of ephemeral images made by low-caste Hindu artisans.

There are two other small temples, both open sheds, to visit; both are for the Naitami clan. The first is for Paknabundin Matai, who is represented by a big stone, and the other for Tallur Muttai, the Village Mother, also represented by a stone. These four temples of the plain are not without their charm; set among great trees they look towards the grim rocks of the hills above them. But they have not the hard clear light and freedom of the shrines that brave the rocks and mountain.

VI. THE MURIA PRIESTHOOD

Who are the priests that officiate at these temples? In a sense every Muria is a priest; for the head of each family tends the dead of his house and can make offerings to his personal gods, but there are priestly families of greater or less influence which have performed the worship of the gods for generations.

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Notable among these is the priest of the clan-god or Anga, often now called the Pen-Pujari or Pen-Gaita. In the Chota Dongar and Partabpur areas, he is called the Pen-Waddai. He is also known as the Dhurwa, which is the name of a tribe in the south of the State and possibly has associations with the Dhur Gond. This use of a tribal name as a priestly title is paralleled by the use of the word Baiga to denote a village-priest. It suggests that the Dhurwa tribe like the Baiga is regarded by the people as of great antiquity.

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Then there is the priest of the *bhum* or earth. The Kaser-Gaita (knife-priest), also known as the Bhum-Gaita or Mati-Gaita (earth-priest), has the duty of offering sacrifices to the earth and keeping the village free of disease. It is he who must go to the fields and clearings when they are prepared and must make offerings at sowing time and harvest.

THE MURIA AND THEIR GHOTUL

793 There are also in most villages one or more Pujari, as they are now called, who are the priests of the more Hinduized deities, such as Danteshwari and her consort Bangaram. In most villages there are many minor deities and each of these may have its special Pujari.

These men do not form in any sense a special priestly class. Only in very rare instances could you recognize a Gaita or Pujari by his bearing or appearance. They are simple, decent, kindly men who spend most of their lives in the field and forest, but they have been chosen, as their parents were chosen, to mediate between men and the unseen mysterious gods. They are invariably, so far as I know, men of good character and never abuse their position unless the dark fate of supernatural power comes upon them and they turn to black magic. They often have to discipline themselves and to exercise a restraint which is not common among the Muria. All village priests must [785] fast and be chaste on the day and night preceding any major ceremony. In some places the period of abstinence may extend to a week.

In some villages, not all, of the Chota Dongar Pargana the Kaser-Gaita is only able to hold his office until he is married. He is thus usually a boy of about sixteen. He is not allowed to go to the ghotul; he must have as little as possible to do with women; even a woman's shadow must not fall on his body. He should not take tobacco from anyone's hands for fear his wife might be in her period. He should not go to a bazaar for fear he unwittingly touch such a woman. He must not talk to a man whose wife is menstruating. In his own home, his cooking-pot is separate from the others. Few boys could endure so rigorous a regime for long, and the Gaita is only made to hold office for three years. Then the god reveals in a dream which of the chelik should take his place. If the old Gaita returns to the ghotul before he is married, he gives the chelik and motiari a feast of pork and liquor.

793 When a Gaita dies his successor is not immediately appointed. In eastern Kondagaon, although the eldest son inherits the Gaitaship automatically, he 787 cannot exercise his functions until he has had a certain recognized and official dream appointing him and authorizing him to act. In other parts of the State a ceremonial hunt is held before the son or brother of the dead Gaita can take his place. In the name of the dead man, the whole village goes out to hunt and they take the omens from the animals they get. If they kill a hare it means that the dead man disapproves of his son or brother and that the inheritance must pass out of the family. If they get a male animal it means that the dead Gaita does not want a successor at all. If, however, they shoot a female sambhar, chital or barking-deer, they accept this as meaning that the late Gaita's son or brother may be appointed. Should they fail to get one of these animals, they fast the whole day, cook and eat outside their houses in the evening and sleep away from their wives and go out daily to hunt for three days. If within this period they succeed in shooting one or other of the three female animals required, the new Gaita begins his duties forthwith; otherwise they wait for a year and then repeat the test.

793 Throughout tribal India the influence of the priest is greatly modified by that of the seer. Often these functions are combined in the same person, and 791 his influence is thus greatly increased. But at every ceremony, every festival, in all cases of sickness, at the last rites of the dead, the priests have to consult the prophets for their instructions. There is not, in fact, anything like a definite system of ritual which must always be performed in the same manner. There is rather a great repertory of rites and customs from which many possible combinations can be drawn. The prophet or medium of the gods has to explain

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in each case what kind of worship, what special offerings, what peculiar rites will be acceptable to the god.

These mediums are known in Bastar by the Halbi word Siraha. A Leski is sometimes the Siraha's assistant; sometimes the words are used synonymously. The Siraha does not offer sacrifice, indeed he is not a priest at all; he is simply a medium through whom the gods make known their will. He has the power of falling into trance, of dancing ecstatically and of diagnosing disease and interpreting the divine commands while in this condition. Scores of these men may be seen at any of the great festivals in the State. With their long hair flying wildly about them as they shake their heads, with scourges and whips in their hands and their drunken, drugged, besotted look, they are a distinctive feature of every Muria religious assembly. Yet, in ordinary life, they are completely normal, sensible, hard-working men and no one would suppose that they were capable of such remarkable transformations.

The Gunia, who understands *guni* or magical charms, is simply a medicine-man. He is called in to cure the sick, to recover lost property and to discover the culprit when goods or cattle are stolen. The Panjiyar is a diviner who works by measuring bits of grass which he questions until he obtains the correct answer. The Gunia tends rather to work with a winnowing-fan or a lamp. Both use grain for divination.

Another common form of divination in Bastar is by eggs. Among the Hill Maria, the Kaser-Gaita watches the eggs hatched in his house; if these get addled it may be a sign that the village site should be changed. The Muria test the omens by egg-throwing at the time of breaking stilts.[1] All the Bastar tribes use eggs in worship, and offer them before going out to hunt and fish, 'for they are greatly loved by the gods'.

Eggs are liked by the gods because 'an egg is like a virgin whom no one has touched, or a pregnant woman who holds two souls at once'. A curious tale explains the origin of poultry.

> There was an entirely dark village twelve *kos* long. Once the people went out with a widow's son to search for light. They went a long long way until they lay down weary to sleep. When they awoke they found the sun in the sky. The widow's son declared that he had not slept and had seen a one-legged man put the sun there. The others were jealous that he should have seen this sight and killed him. They divided the flesh among themselves and gave some to the boy's mother, who took it not knowing what it was. She put it aside for him to eat when he should return. But next day, early in the morning as the sun came into the sky, the boy's flesh turned into a cock and began to crow. So when a hen lays an egg it is only a lump of flesh; it is when it hears the cock crow that life comes into it. That is why gods and men love eggs—for they are a sign of strength and life.

For this reason, it is said, gods and ghosts are not often responsible for addling eggs; this is done by human enemies. If a setting of eggs is thus spoilt by black magic, it should be lifted up together with its straw and placed on a piece of an earthen pot. It should be taken to a cross-road, where the priest must say, '*Thu thu, mailotia*, go back to whoever sent you'. He throws away the eggs and the party returns home without looking back. Elsewhere when

[1] Divination by egg-throwing is recorded of the Khasi.—P. R. T. Gurdon, *The Khasis* (London, 1914), pp. 16 and 220ff. In 1942 I found the Juang of Pal Lahara employing the virgin son of the village priest to test the omens, before a festival, by egg-throwing. The use of eggs in worship is widespread in Bastar and Orissa.

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623 lay to the Pargana Manjhi and his panchayat which consisted [633] of four headmen chosen from his group of villages.

In the ten years since these panchayats were established, they have done a great deal of work, and on the whole may be said to have functioned very well. A few headmen have abused their positions; there has been a certain amount of diversion of fines to uses for which they were not intended; probably a number of less influential people have not always had the justice that they might have expected. But this might have happened even in the ordinary Courts, and there is no doubt whatever that the establishment of these panchayats has done a great deal to build up the self-respect of Maria and Muria, and has developed leadership among them.

622 The importance of the panchayat for our subject is 623 obvious. In the first place, it provides a body of semi-official elders in every village whose duty it is to assist the police, and indeed whenever a suspicious death occurs in a village, the investigating officer calls the panchayat for a sort of inquest to which he acts as coroner and they as jury. On the other hand, the establishment of the village elders in a position of considerable authority makes it easy for them, when they wish to do so, to conceal a crime or deal with it themselves. Where a headman is himself the culprit, he may force the people to hush up his guilt; and the solidarity that is created by allowing the village under its own elders to settle many of its own affairs helps the headman to attain this end. This is no argument against the establishment of the panchayat. But it does mean that it is important for the authorities to hold the confidence of the headmen, and to inspire them constantly with a sense of their civic duties.

793 Side by side with the secular leaders are the religious elders of the village, though there is no reason why spiritual and secular functions should not be, as they often are, combined in the same persons. The priests and medicine-men naturally have more influence than the official headmen, the most powerful combination being when the headman himself is a Waddai or Siraha.

Chief among the religious elders is the Bhum-Gaita or Perma, the priest of the soil whose duty it is to see to all the sacrifices concerned with the village and its festivals, and

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to perform the worship of the Village Mother. The Pen-793
Waddai or Waddai is the priest of the clan who fulfils spiritual duties for its members. There may be more than one Waddai in a village or, on the other hand, one Waddai may have jurisdiction over several villages. Everything depends on the distribution of the clan members in the locality. The Waddai is of great importance because of his association with the Ancestors and the Dead. He has to purify offenders against the clan rules, and those who have done anything which might conceivably offend the Dead. The Hanagunda may be the Waddai or some lesser personage. His duty is to act as master of ceremonies at a funeral and to perform the special rites of appeasement for the ghost. He becomes of great importance when anyone has met an unnatural death such as being killed by a tiger or has been executed.

In addition to these regular priests, there are a large 791
number of men who are regarded as being in a special way the servants and interpreters of the gods. These men have the power of falling into ecstacy and in this condition divine the will and proclaim the wishes of unseen beings. They are called Siraha or Gunia. They are chiefly in demand for the cure of disease. Since disease is believed to be the result of supernatural activity on the part of some ghost or demon, it is by supernatural means that it must be diagnosed and cured. The Siraha often has houses round his compound for in-patients, and a celebrated medicine-man may attract sick and anxious people from a wide area.

These men, civil or religious, are the real rulers of the 623
Bastar village. Their influence is more far-reaching, their 674x
word is of greater effect than that of the most popular officials. Only the Maharaja, from whom they derive their power, is greater. Today their power is greatly circumscribed, but, as we will see, it has not altogether disappeared. They can still make unbearable the life of witch or sorcerer; they can still ostracize the social rebel; they can still fine the domestic tyrant and subdue the village bully. The ordeal by fire or burning oil still remains a weapon in their hands, and the threat of excommunication is a greater deterrent than many of the provisions of the Indian Penal Code.

The religious leaders insist on the supernatural dangers of crime, the defilement of jail or handcuffs, the painful death